

WHAT DOES JESUS BELIEVE ABOUT ME?

3. “God Gave...”

John 3: 1-17

One of the problems with familiar Bible passages is that they are familiar! We have in our John passage the most favorite Bible passage in the scriptures. You see it everywhere - - on barns in the country, on plaques hanging in our homes, at football and baseball games, as trinkets we wear. It is probably the one verse that everyone can quote whether they are Christian or not: John 3: 16

Because it is so commonly known, I think we miss a great deal about its meaning and purpose. So, today we are

looking at John 3: 1-17 to see what we might learn. I remind you this is the scripture passage I did not read last week because the sermon had gone too long on Genesis 12. And thinking about your concentration level as well as your “seat” ability, I deferred to this week.

Remember, also, the theme I have chosen for our Lenten journey, “What Does Jesus Believe about Me?” We look at this passage attempting to answer that question about the most famous verse in the whole Bible.

In order to appreciate John 3:16, we have to be aware of its context. Often, we quote the passage out of its context and

forget the setting from which it came. That is where the first 15 verses of chapter 3 come into play. And as you remember, the main character in this story is Nicodemus.

It seems that Nicodemus was a theologian. In fact, in verse 1 he is called a leader of the Jews. He was a member of the Sanhedrin. He comes to Jesus and actually shows Jesus some respect. He declares that Jesus is a teacher who has come from God. And, he declares no one can do the signs, the miracles, which Jesus does apart from the presence of God. So, Nicodemus was polite and courteous and respectful.

Yet an interesting piece in the story is that Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the night! It is a curious detail in the story. We do not know why that aspect is mentioned. Was Nicodemus not wanting his colleagues to know he was meeting with Jesus? Does it look like he would be going over to the other side if people saw him? Is Nicodemus plotting something against Jesus and wanted to surprise people?

Who knows? Yet, I wonder if that is not how some of us come to Jesus. Maybe not at night. But privately. We don't want people to think we are zealots

and very religious. We don't want people to think we have gone off the deep end.

Where this "by night" approach to our faith concerns me is that many of us (and I am talking about Presbyterians) are not comfortable using "God Language" in our daily lives. We declare that God is always with us, yet we rarely find ourselves declaring that the negative encounter with a friend over a disagreement went better than I thought it would go because God was present with me. God helped me keep my cool. God gave me the right words to say.

Or we have a very difficult decision to make. Depending on what we decide,

it could be good or bad. Yet, do we ever share that we stopped and literally prayed for guidance? We stopped and took a deep breath and called on God's Spirit to calm our anxiety in order to see what God wanted us to do?

Unfortunately, in our society our Christian faith has been hijacked. It is misquoted. It is used to justify political decisions. The label "evangelical" conjures up a particular political position on issues. It is an almost coercive approach to our faith that is often foreign with our experience. So, there could be lots of reasons why we have come by 'night.'

After Nicodemus was so kind to Jesus, Jesus comes across as almost rude. While Jesus was complimented by Nicodemus, Jesus shouts back, “No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Poor Nicodemus is thrown a curve ball. How can you be born again after growing old? Can you re-enter your mother’s womb a second time?

Good old literal Nicodemus. He took Jesus literally and was confused! How can these things be, he wondered?

This great theological, this leader of the Jews, was smacked by Jesus. One thing I had never thought about until this

week is how some really “true” Christians take every word in the Bible literally! And some of those folks like the red-letter edition of the Bible where everything Jesus says is in red lettering.

Well in this passage, Jesus is not talking literally! He was talking metaphorically. He was trying to make the point that until you are born of water and the Spirit, you will never inherit the Kingdom of God or be able to enter into it. That’s the way one comes to have a right relationship with God: water and the Spirit.

Well, not only do Presbyterians have issues about coming to Jesus in the night,

we also have bigger issues when we start talking about the Spirit and being born again. Let me just assure you we will get through this part of the passage without speaking in tongues or doing gyrations on the sanctuary floor

Part of our problem with talking about the Spirit is defined in our passage. Verse 8 declares “The wind blows where it chooses and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

That is too loosey goosey for Presbyterians. We want decency. We want things to be done in order. We need

to see from whence something comes and whether it is going. We have major control issues and not to know what or where things are is just too much!

It is anxiety producing. It is a bit unnerving. It is rather scary. Yet, if it is God’s Spirit, we are to simply strap on the seat belts for the ride of our life. Because we are not talking about earthly matters. We are talking about heavenly matters. We are talking about what God is up to and sometimes we just are not clear of God’s focus and direction. So, that sometimes we just need to be still and realize God is in charge.

Which takes us to the favorite passage, 3:16. The reason one is born of the Spirit is because God loved us. God loved the world. And to comprehend God's love, we have to have guidance from above. We cannot figure it out ourselves.

God loved the world. Another translation is God loved this hateful world. In spite of who we are, God loved us.

Further it does not matter whether we respond back or not. God still loves us.

And to comprehend this incredible love, you have to have God's Spirit

guiding and teaching us. For this love is contrary to our nature.

You see we live in a world where we earn our keep. We live in a world where we work to get ahead. We live in a world where there is no free lunch. So, to say we are loved period is not easy to take or understand. We wonder what is the catch **OR** how can I pay back such a nice gift?

In seminary this point came home to me in a powerful way through a course in New Testament. Balmer Kelly was teaching the course. He was talking about God's love, about God's grace. All of a sudden, he goes up to a student and says, "God's grace is like this: he then hands

the student a \$5 bill!” In the early 1970’s that was real money for a broke seminarian. The rest of us were just envious.

Dr. Kelly went on to say, “God’s loves is like this gift. You were not expecting it. You did not earn it. It will not affect your grade. It is yours, freely given.”

We were awestruck. Yet, the real point came at the end of the class. The student, as we were leaving, went up to Dr. Kelly and said, “Here is your \$5 back.” To which Dr. Kelly declared, “NO! It is yours. A free gift.”

See, the student thought it was a prop which needed to be returned so it could be used again. God’s love is not a prop. It is a true gift...given for the love of giving it!

Yet how often are we like that student. What can I do to return the gift? What do I need to do to earn God’s favor? There has to be a catch somewhere!

And yet I think that is the meaning behind being born again. We are able to jettison the ways of this world and simply abide in the loving grace of God. We are able to soak in that love which we do not deserve, which we cannot earn, which is freely given. We just have a very hard time believing that.

Part of the value of Nicodemus in this story is how he represents the Jewish faith which reflects the world's approach as well. He was very smart. He was a learned man. He had come up through the ranks and earned his position in the Jewish hierarchy. He had attained his position through hard work, through scholarship, through being smart.

And so, when he was told he had to be born from above, he was lost. He was basically being told that all of these features you have are good. But, as the Rich Young Ruler was told, "You lack one thing." In this case, Nicodemus lacked the ability to lean on God and not

on the laws and his accomplishments.

Lean on God's Spirit which is not always logical. Lean into God's will and not your own desires.

Everyone of us has our Nicodemus traits. We know what is right and proper and appropriate. We have to be in control and in charge. Otherwise things seem like they will fall apart. Jesus is inviting us to surrender. Surrender to the Spirit.

Surrender to God's love. Surrender to the fact that God loves you regardless. You and I cannot out love God. And sometimes we are just dumbfounded to figure it out. And that is why the Spirit is

required even if we do not know where it is going.

One other observation for me this week. The passage does not declare being born again happens only once. I read it as saying that we are continually being born of water and the Spirit. We are constantly amazed at God's loving the world so much. We stand shocked that God could love us when we act the way we do! Yet, that's the Good News in this Lenten Season.

So, now for the test, "What does Jesus believe about me?" In terms of being born from above. In terms of accepting God's acceptance which I

cannot earn. In terms of surrendering to God's will and purpose. In terms of allowing the Spirit to be real in my life? What would Jesus believe about me in these regards?

Or are we like the seminary student who just thinks God's love is a prop to make God look good?

Which way do we go?